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ABSTRACT

This brief asks the question of what happens if the instructor isolates verbs and uses them in lesson plans for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students at the beginning and intermediate levels. The discussion is based on the experiences of one ESL teacher who found that the most pressing practical need of her students was a better command of English verbs for use in the workplace. She planned her lessons around certain verb forms and functions. She started by collecting verbs that were especially useful in the workplace, accomplishing this by asking her students to describe their jobs. The verbs were categorized and listed on the board. As the students began to better understand the importance and usefulness of the verbs, they began to ask questions about when and where to use particular common verbs, such as the difference between "make" and "do." Whether at the beginning or intermediate level, it was found that students comprehended more quickly when certain functions were taught in separate lessons. Graphics such as timelines, charts, cluster maps, and also games effectively reinforced the forms and functions of verbs and helped to evaluate student comprehension. Overall, these lists of everyday, practical verbs and the graphics have proved valuable pedagogical supplements to the standard ESL curriculum. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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Virginia Adult Education Research Network

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Verbs: Where the Action Is

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Verbs: Where the Action Is

Wendy Montanari Kilpatrick, Fairfax County Adult Education

Background

I teach three ESL classes, one each at the beginning, intermediate and high-intermediate levels. My high-intermediate students need work with specific grammar points required to pass standardized English tests. The intermediate-level class consists of young adults finishing their high school credit requirements, and my beginning students are working adults who need "survival" English, that is, the everyday English used in a work environment. Most of my students are those who need jobs or want to advance in their current jobs. I had noticed in practice job interviews that students did not have the correct verbs to articulate their job responsibilities. I decided to investigate the crucial but very basic need that my ESL students have to comprehend and use the correct verb, the "main ingredient" in a sentence.

Inquiry

What will happen if I isolate verbs and use them in my lesson plans for teaching ESL students?

Action

I planned my lessons around certain verb forms and functions, for example, gerunds and their different uses. I started by collecting verbs in my beginning and intermediate classes, concentrating on verbs used in the workplace. I asked one of the more articulate students in the beginning-level class to describe her own daily tasks at her job and I wrote the verbs on the board. Then I elicited verbs from students with different jobs (housekeeping, fast food) and categorized those verbs, then listed them on the board. For the two intermediate-level classes, I provided a list of more academic or abstract verbs (*decide or agree*). For those lessons, we concentrated on verbs that function together in one sentence, such as *She decided to come.* The intermediate students were able to list their work tasks themselves and they found verbs in trade books and articles, all of which contributed to their class list.

Data collection

My data collection tools were my journal, questionnaires to students (*What do you do at work? What job did you have in your country?*), observations, and lesson plans. In my journal, I documented answers to my own questions about the lesson plans (*What student reactions were most affirming/puzzling?*) and errors I found in all student work. Written statements such as *The witch would to break the egg, I bus drive in my country,* and *I did going to the university* are examples of verb errors from student journals and questionnaires that contributed to lesson plans.

Another valuable data source materialized after students understood the importance of verbs. Students' own questions such as: *What's the difference between the 'do's' in 'What do you do?' When do we use 'make' and when 'do'? Why do we say, 'I am leaving tomorrow' and the action isn't now?* From these and other questions, 19 practical lesson plans evolved: the different functions of *do*; the uses of ***make*** and *do* in expressions; the present progressive tense and mood to express events happening now and in the future; and two verbs that communicate one idea in a sentence.

Findings

Throughout my study, I continued to supply most of the verbs for the class lists at the beginning level. Intermediate students found the verbs themselves in context, and as a result, remembered the definitions, and were more easily able to apply the verbs to lessons.

Whether at the beginning level or intermediate, I found that students comprehended more quickly when I taught certain functions in separate

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lessons. For example, *do* is used as a regular verb — *I do this every day. Do* also functions as a helping word when forming questions or negative statements — *Does she study English every day?* or *She does not write every day.* Another example of functions that should be taught separately are *have, have to*, and the 'helping' verb *have* used in compound moods, that is — *They have lived here.*

Expressions using *make* and *do* were more helpful when taught together in the same lesson — *Make the beds, Do the dishes.* Moods and tenses that function together should be taught together as in *I had already eaten...* (past perfect) relative to *By the time they arrived...* (simple past). I found that different functions of the gerund form of the verb are less confusing when taught together — *I'm studying now* (the action is now) vs. *She's leaving Saturday* (the action is in the future).

Graphics such as timelines, charts, cluster maps, and games effectively reinforced the forms and functions of verbs and helped to evaluate student comprehension. The high-intermediate students understood more complicated verbs and their complements when they were able to memorize a group of like verbs. I gave groups of verbs to my high-intermediate students, and in pairs, they had to discover and present (verbally and in writing) what complements could be used after those verbs, as the chart below illustrates:

Main Verb	'to' + verb	Verb + -ing	'That' phrase	Someone + infinitive	Someone+ 'that' phrase	'to someone' + 'that phrase'
deny		✔	✔			✔
suggest		✔	✔			✔
agree	✔		✔			
decide	✔		✔			

With the checkmarks meaning 'yes,' this verb can be followed by this complement,' students made and presented this type of chart to the class. The students then gave definitions of the words, and example sentences: *The thief denied stealing; They denied that they had awakened the baby.*

Implications and Future Directions

I will be able to use these lesson plans and additional ones I develop as practical exercises and to supplement other curricula. Besides effectively sparking students' creative and critical thinking, graphics such as charts and cluster maps organize my own thinking and planning. I will continue to use them. Asking questions and listening to student questions, recording observations in my journal, and identifying student errors were most effective sources for my data collection. I discovered that teaching verbs is a never-ending process and that practitioner research has given me valuable tools and a firm foundation for continuing to isolate and teach them. I now keep a journal to help evaluate my lesson plans and I also use my questions and those of my students for assessing student needs. I will use the tools that I discovered in my practitioner research for future teachings. ❑

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

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